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## Children's Literature in the Australian Context

### Chapter Highlights

- Literary traditions of Australian literature
- Subjectivity
- Aesthetic experience
- Brief historical overview
- Geographical contexts
- Indigenous literature
- Historical contexts

As the Australian Curriculum states, literature not only helps shape personal and cultural identities; it also help to shape national identities. As I have written elsewhere, children's books play a profound role in the making of national imaginations: 'Books read and reinforced in community—first family, then school, then that of peers—become part of the images we think with, part of a literate schema, part of a shared folk culture' (Johnston 2004, p. 960).

The Curriculum also makes it clear that there is to be 'an increasingly informed appreciation of the place of Australian literature among other literary traditions', that this is to include Australian Indigenous literature and 'the literary traditions and expressions of other nations in the Asia-Pacific region' (National Curriculum Board 2009, p. 8).

Children's books, both historical and contemporary, provide an excellent and reader-friendly introduction to the study of such traditions, in primary, secondary, and tertiary classrooms. There is much about the Australian literary tradition that can be traced through the books produced for its children, and some of these older books should be revisited not only because they are interesting in their own right but for what they reveal (sometimes sadly) about literary and cultural attitudes and concerns of their times.

Perry Modelman describes as an important aspect of literacy what he calls *narrative literacy*: knowledge that allows a reader or viewer to place the story in a literary and, as Modelman (2002, p. 5) also argues, art world that provides contexts of understanding and recognition. Part of such narrative literacy is knowledge of the books that are part of national culture. This is so even when one has come to a country only more recently; I remember hearing the former Governor General of Canada, Adrienne Clarkson, saying that as a small Chinese immigrant to Canada, *Rilla of Ingleside*, by L.M. Montgomery, provided a knowledge and love for her adopted country that she has never forgotten.

Below is a brief historical overview noting some of the books that are still available, that are of literary, historical, and cultural interest in the Australian context, and that are arguably part of a fledgling Australian canon.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Australia is a paradox. It is the largest island—and the smallest continent. Compared to many countries, its history is short, yet it has been inhabited by a vibrant and dynamic people, with rich cultural and spiritual identities profoundly imbricated in everyday practices, for something like 50,000 years.

Its landmass is criss-crossed with songlines—an invisible aural mapping that

celebrates both topography and event—yet before the 18th century it was only a suspicion, a rumour, to most of the larger world, despite the fact that as early as the second century

AD the Greek-Egyptian astronomer and geographer Claudius Ptolemy had postulated the presence of a continent in the southern hemisphere east of Africa. It

appeared in cartographies as an imprecise mass—a *Terra Incognita* (Unknown Land), a *Terra Australis* (Land of the South). Despite the efforts of various Portuguese and Dutch

navigators (Dirk Hartog landed on the West Australian coast in 1616, Abel Tasman named the south-west coast of Tasmania 'Van Diemen's Land' in 1642), it was not until 1770

that the English Lieutenant James Cook, in the barque *Endeavour*, chartered the eastern coast. The name 'Australia' was first used in Alexander Dalrymple's collection *Voyages of*

*the South Seas*, published in 1770; a member of Cook's crew, the botanist Joseph Banks, carried a pre-publication copy of this book with him on the voyage. The fifth governor of

New South Wales, Lachlan Macquarie, began using the name in official correspondence after 1817, following the 1814 charts of Matthew Flinders. By 1824, when Captain King's

maritime survey charts were published, the name was in common use, notwithstanding the fact that until 1901, and Federation, the country was a group of colonies connected

primarily by their relationship to the Colonial Office in London. Australia's cities have no medieval roots, no dark walled hearts, no visible impact of

Renaissance or revolution; they emerge in a bang only in modern history: after the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay, and then Farm Cove, in 1788.

This was 5000-odd years after the art of writing and reading stirred the great civilisations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, 2225 years after the building of the Parthenon, 340-odd years

after Gutenberg invented the printing press, and after the Turks captured Constantinople (which even at that time had been a bastion of Christianity for eleven centuries).

It was 300 years after Columbus famously 'sailed the ocean blue', and almost 300 years after Luther nailed his heartfelt protests to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in

1517, thus triggering the Reformation. It was twelve years after the American Declaration of Independence of 1776.

The European colony of New South Wales, the seed of the modern nation of Australia, was founded in the same year as Mozart wrote his last symphony, the *Jupiter* (1788). It

was at more or less the same time as the French Revolution (from 1789), more or less the same time as Napoleon's conquests, and just before Trafalgar (1805) and his final defeat

at the famous Battle of Waterloo of 1815.

Yet the geography of this newer New World is ancient; current geological and archaeo-logical wisdom is that the land is more than 800 million years old. The Finkle River, which winds its way across Central Australia, is thought to be 350 million years old.

Australia's physical location was problematical from the beginning. The modern nation was established as a colony of the British Empire, and at first settled in the main by Europeans. The country has been part of an Empire, then part of a Commonwealth; its early identity was as a nation of 'The West', even as part of Europe. Yet its land is in the South Seas, at the edge of the Indian Ocean. In *Is Australia an Asian Country?* Stephen Fitzgerald (1997) discusses the country's struggle with ways of defining itself in terms of region—as 'Australasia', as part of the 'Pacific Rim', as part of 'Oceania'.

### CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF AUSTRALIA IN EARLY CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Looking at early texts from a later period can provide a way of identifying and recognising perspectives and the power of point of view. The first reference to the distant colony in a fictional story for children is a cautionary tale which describes Botany Bay as a place of exile and punishment. Maria Edgeworth's 'Lazy Lawrence' in *The Parents' Assistant; or, Stories for Children* (1796) is a moral tale that contrasts the honesty of Jem, the idleness of Lazy Lawrence, and the wickedness of a stable boy, who is suitably punished by transportation to Botany Bay:

In the dead of the night, Lawrence heard somebody tap at his window. He knew well who it was, for this was the signal agreed upon between him and his wicked companion. He trembled at the thought of what he was about to do.... He brought Jem's broken flower pot, with all the money in it, to the door. The black cloud had now passed over the moon, and the light shone full upon them. 'What do we stand here for?' said the stable boy, snatching the flower-pot out of Lawrence's trembling hands, and pulled him away from the door. 'Good God!' cried Lawrence, 'you won't take all. You said you'd only take half a crown, and pay it back on Monday. You said you'd only take half a crown!'

'Hold your tongue,' replied the other, walking on, deaf to all remonstrances—'if ever I am to be hanged, it sha'n't be for half a crown.'

Lawrence's blood ran cold in his veins, and he felt as if all his hair stood on end. Not another word passed. His accomplice carried off the money, and Lawrence crept, with all the horrors of guilt upon him, to his restless bed. All night he was starting from frightful dreams; or else, broad awake, he lay listening to every small noise, unable to stir, and scarcely daring to breathe—tormented by that most dreadful of all kinds of fear, that fear which is the constant companion of an evil conscience.

Later, their crime is discovered:

'We must take him before the justice,' said the farmer, 'and he'll be lodged in Bristol gaol.' 'Oh!' said Jem, springing forwards when Lawrence's hands were going to be tied, 'let him go—won't you?—can't you let him go?'

'Yes, madam, for mercy's sake,' said Jem's mother to the lady, 'think what a disgrace to his family to be sent to gaol.'

His father stood by wringing his hands in an agony of despair. 'It's all my fault,' cried he; 'I brought him up in idleness.'

'But he'll never be idle any more,' said Jem; 'won't you speak for him, ma'am?'

'Don't ask the lady to speak for him,' said the farmer; 'it's better he should go to Bridewell now, than to the gallows by-and-by.'

Nothing more was said; for everybody felt the truth of the farmer's speech.

Lawrence was eventually sent to Bridewell for a month, and the stable-boy was sent for trial, convicted, and transported to Botany Bay.

The first children's story with an Australian setting was written in French, *Les Enfants de 15 Ans* (1813). The novelist Sophie de Renneville (1772–1822) was a highly educated woman who wrote prolifically, mainly for young people. Her *Contes variés à la portée des enfants de différents âges* was published in four volumes in Paris, and was a collection of instructive stories meant for the moral improvement of children.

As time went on, however, tales reaching England about the new colony became different, more exciting, promising of not only adventure but of a better life. A different idea about the distant colony crept into stories for children; they switched from being cautionary ('Be good or this is what will happen') to being cautiously approving ('Go there and maybe make good!'). This idea of making good was to become pervasive. In fact, in early-19th-century stories such as 'The Happy Grandmother and her Grandchildren who went to Australia', from Peter Pratt's *Amusing and Instructive Tales* (c. 1832), Australia became rather exotic and glamorous. Unfortunately, this story is an example of the misconceptions and ignorance that were to flaw many stories about the colony, and is more amusing than instructive. For example, at one point there is a strange description of an incident with a kangaroo (note that kangaroos are herbivorous!):

What pleased little Meg more than anything, was a tame kangaroo, that lapped tea from her bowl and picked a bone like a monkey.

This pattern was continued by the American writer 'Uncle Peter' (Samuel Griswold Goodrich) in one of his numerous *Peter Parley* books. Early American books for children were religious tracts or books of instruction, such as the famous New England Primer (c. 1686–90); Goodrich developed a more informal style in his first book, *Tales of Peter Parley about America* (1827). In *Tales About the Sea* he wrote, with some surprise and condescension, 'a very curious thing, that we should find a town, in these remote regions, bearing all the marks of an English city' whose inhabitants, rather than being the 'desperate individuals' one might expect, 'have become industrious and honest members of society.' In Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860–62), Magwitch the felon can help him because he made his fortune in a rich and fertile distant land, and this has enabled him not only to start again and make good, but to make good spectacularly. Dickens had never visited Australia (although his two sons did), but neither had the prolific English writer W.H.G. Kingston, who similarly accessed New South Wales as a space where almost miraculous changes could take place in growth and character development. In Kingston's *The Young Berringtons; or, The Boy Explorers* (1880), English cousins (new arrivals or

'new chums') are taught to be 'men' by their earlier-settled cousins, who have become tough, brown, and brave through their experience in the new land.

## COLONIAL LITERATURE

The first book published for children in what was then known as the colony of New South Wales, *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* (1841) by 'A Lady Long Resident in New South Wales' (generally thought to be Charlotte Barton), followed the strong pedagogical intent and dialogue format typical of 18th and 19th-century European patterns:

Julius: What numbers of Ducks there were on the Lake and flying about it!

Lucy: I saw them flying out of the Fresh Water Creek. I dare say they make their nests among the reeds in the banks, Mamma.

Mrs. S: Very likely, my love.

Emma: There were a great many Black Swans too, and that lovely Pelican! Was it not beautiful, Mamma?

Mrs. S: It was, dear! And so large, that at first I thought it was a white sail of a little Boat.

Julius: (Laughing). So did I, Mamma. I think it must have been stretching and flapping its great wings. It was at the opposite side of the Lake when we saw it first.

Clara: We had a better view of one at St George's Basin. I saw its pouch distinctly.

Lucy: I think it was fishing then.

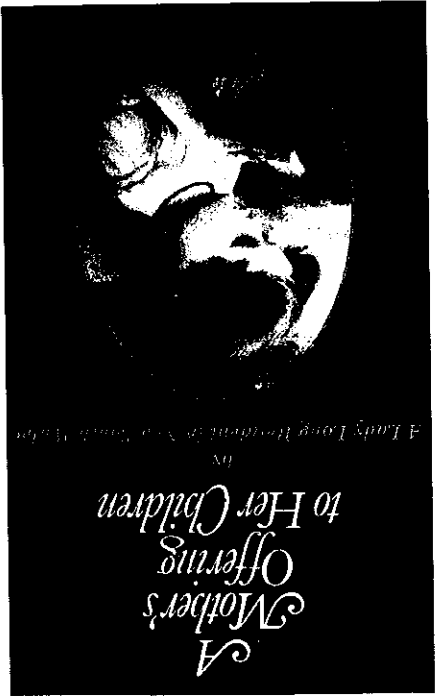
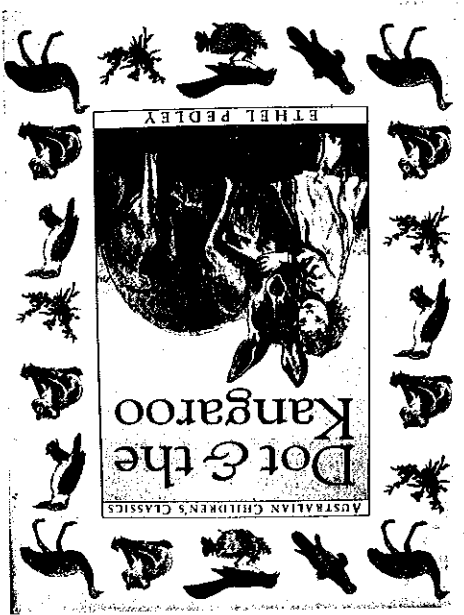
Clara: Are there any Volcanoes in this Country, Mamma, that are burning now?

Despite the stilted format of the times, and some of its

unfortunate depictions, *A Mother's Offering to her Children* reflects a literary impulse that can be seen across the Australian literary continuum—a fascination with landscape. In children's literature this has evolved into a robust advocacy which began as early as Ethel Pedley's *Dot and the Kangaroo* (published posthumously in 1899) and developed into a tradition that over the years would become variously known as 'conservation', 'Gould League of Bird Lovers', 'environmentalism', 'Green', and 'sustainability.' Its dedication reads:

To the children of Australia in the hope of enlisting their sympathies for the many beautiful, amiable, and frolicsome creatures of their fair land whose extinction, through ruthless destruction, is being surely accomplished.

*Dot and the Kangaroo* tells of a little girl who becomes lost in the bush while picking wildflowers, and of her rescue



by a kangaroo that is also sad because it has lost its joey (baby kangaroo). Despite its dated language and moralistic tone, this book is interesting because it describes both the harshness and dangers of the bush (where lost children were all too common) and its distinctive beauty:

The sun arose in a sky all gorgeous in gold and crimson, and flashed upon a world glittering with dewy freshness. Sweet odours from the aromatic bush filled the air, and every living creature made what noise it could, to show its joy in being happy and free in the beautiful bush. (p. 67)

Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* was published in London in 1894 and has never been out of print. Turner stresses the distinctiveness not only of landscape but of her little Australians, who are different, she says, precisely because of the land they live in. She writes that 'a lurking spark of joyousness and rebellion in nature here, and therefore in children'. On the first page, we are told that they are 'not good', because 'Australian children never are':

It may be that the miasmas of naughtiness develop best in the sunny brilliancy of our atmosphere. It may be that the land and the people are young-hearted together, and the children's spirits not crushed and saddened by the shadows of long years' sorrowful history. (pp. 9–10)

*Seven Little Australians* was written at a time when Australians were beginning to see themselves as a nation, during the time of the cry of 'one people, one destiny' that was to lead to Federation in 1901. A.B. ('Banjo') Paterson's collection of ballads, *The Man from Snowy River*, was published in 1895 with huge sales, Henry Lawson's short stories, *While the Billy Boils*, were published in 1896, and the 'Heidelberg School' of artists were looking at country to paint their lovely artworks (e.g. Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams* of 1890, Arthur Streeton's *Golden Summer* of 1889 and *Sydney Sunshine Exhibition* of 1896). Turner's original manuscript of *Seven Little Australians* included an Aboriginal legend telling how the kookaburra (the native kingfisher) got its laugh. This was excised in the published version, probably because of her criticism of the country's policies towards its indigenous population:

...when Tettawonga's ancestors were brave and strong and happy as careless children, when their worst nightmare had never shown them so evil a time as the white man would bring to their race... (MS, Heritage Collection, Mitchell Library)

This passage is now included in the special centenary edition of the text.

## AUSTRALIAN ROMANTIC NATIONALISM

*Dot and the Kangaroo* may be seen as prefiguring the wave of what can be called Australian romantic nationalism (Johnston 2004c) inspired by the federation of separate colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia. The children's books of this era played a significant role in the evolution of 'the bush' and bush mythologies as part of national consciousness and identity, even though it was not actually the experience of most Australians. Writers/artists turned to the depictions of gum trees and blossom, wattle trees, kangaroos, koalas, possums, wombats, and platypuses.

In 1910 Mary Grant Bruce published *A Little Bush Maid*, to be followed in 1913 by *Norah of Billabong*. These were the first of a highly successful series of fifteen books (1910–42), telling of the adventures of Norah and her family on the remote property Billabong—'billabong' is an aboriginal [Wiradjuri] word for 'waterhole'. These are stories that also emphasise the difference of Australian space:

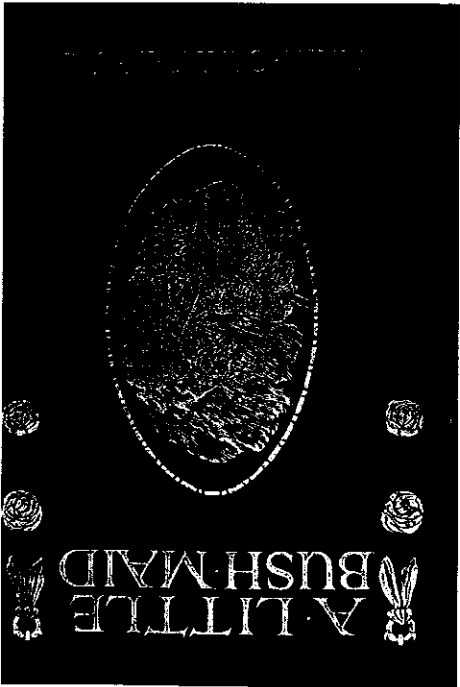
Norah's home was on a big station in the north of Victoria—so large that you could almost, in her own phrase, 'ride all day and never see anyone you didn't want to see', which was a great advantage in Norah's eyes. Not that Billabong Station ever seemed to the little girl a place that you needed to praise in any way. It occupied so very modest a position as the loveliest part of the world! (*A Little Bush Maid*, p. 7)

Just as the little Australians are different, so is Billabong:

There was a huge front garden, not at all a proper kind of garden, but a great stretch of smooth buffalo grass, dotted with all kinds of trees, amongst which flower beds cropped up in most unexpected and unlikely places, just as if some giant had flung them out on the grass like a handful of pebbles that scattered as they flew. (p. 8)

Norman Lindsay wrote and illustrated *The Magic Pudding* in 1918. It features the adventures of Bunyip Bluegum (a koala bear), Bill Barnacle (a sailor), and Sam Sawnoff (a penguin), who all travel around Australia with a steak and kidney pudding that walks and talks, and makes itself whole whenever a slice is removed: it is a 'cut an' come again' pudding'. They are chased by two 'Puddin' thieves', a possum and a wombat. This book, like *Seven Little Australians*, like *Norah of Billabong*, stresses the idea of home:

Home, home, home,  
That's the song of them that roam,  
The song of the roaring, rolling sea  
Is all about rolling home. (p. 171)



Another book which appeared in 1918 is *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepote: Their Adventures Wonderful* by May Gibbs. Like *Dot and the Kangaroo*, this begins with an environmental message: 'Humans, please be kind to all Bush Creatures and don't pull flowers up by the roots.'

This is a different type of nationalist fantasy, featuring gumnut fairies—naked cherubs with plump round bottoms who live in the blossoms of a gum tree and have to escape the wicked Banksia Men and Mrs Snake.

### EARLY WRITINGS OF INDIGENOUS STORIES

Traditional Indigenous stories are expressions of physical, cultural, spiritual, custodial, and sacred connectedness. Aboriginal narratives, visual and verbal, told that individuals are connected to land—'country'—by 'systems that organise all aspects of life and perceptions; and indeed, by which the universe is ordered' (Caruana 1996, p. 15); that the Dreaming or Dreamtime 'provides the ideological framework by which human society retains a harmonious equilibrium with the universe' (p. 10); and that art and song express this connection with country:

In almost all Indigenous genres, the songs themselves are regarded as having non-human origin. Old songs, the most powerful Dreaming songs, were created by Dreaming beings, often as part of the process of differentiating and creating the country and the social world in its present form. Thus songs, like language and other forms of culture, reside in the country. (Kleinart & Neale 2000, p. 330)



The narrative power of Dreaming stories attracted white authors who towards the end of the 19th century began writing down these oral tales for publication, often with illustrations. Some were insensitive both in the way material was gathered and in their writing, but some of the better collections include the following.

*King Bungees Phylla: Stories Illustrative of Manners and Customs that Prevailed among Australian Aborigines*, by Mary-Anne Fitzgerald (1891), is made up of stories told to the author as a child by 'the Black King', and has as its dedication: 'To the Boys and Girls of My Native Country...hoping it may interest them in the Folk-Lore of that simple

The land, for Aboriginal people, is a vibrant spiritual landscape. It is peopled in spirit form by ancestors who originated in the Dreaming, the creative period of time immemorial. The ancestors travelled the country, engaging in adventures which created the people, the natural features of the land, and established the code of life which is today called the '[D]reaming' or the '[L]aw'... (quoted in Kleinart & Neale 2000, p. 9)

Michael Anderson writes:

### AUSTRALIAN PICTUREBOOKS

Picturebooks are commonly described as 'beginning' in Australia in 1970 with Desmond Digby's illustrated edition of Australia's national song, *Waltzing Matilda*, which was awarded the Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year Award in 1971. Early classics include *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* (Wagner & Brooks 1973) in which the fable of the verbal text is extended into allegory when set alongside Brooks's visual text; and *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* (1977), also by Wagner and Brooks, which explores ideas of space, possession, jealousy, and power through the story of an old woman, Rose, her dog John Brown, and a black cat who comes visiting at night. Pamela Allen's *Who Sank the Boat?* (1982), *Mulga Bill's Bicycle*, illustrated by Kilmeny and Deborah Niland (1988), *Possum Magic* by Mem Fox and Julie Vivas (1983),

children's books as the century grew older. Around about the middle of the 20th century, books became more 'realistic' and concerned with the challenges of contemporary living. Books by Nan Chauncy (1900–70), Eve Pownall (1901–82), Joan Phipson (1912–), Colin Thiele (1920–), Ivan Southall (1921–2009), Patricia Wrightson (1921–2010), Hesba Fay Brinsmead (1922–), and Eleanor Spence (1928–) often located their stories in bush settings, or in clearly identified Australian cityscapes. Later, Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980) and Libby Gleeson's stories such as *I Am Susannah* (1987) created their own kind of inner-city literary geography.

### SOCIAL REALISM

In the 20th century, Daisy Bates collected *Tales Told to Kabbarti*; these were retold by Barbara Ker Wilson in 1972. The distinguished anthropologist Catherine H. Berndt arranged and translated *Land of the Rainbow Snake: Aboriginal Children's Stories and Songs from Western Arnhem Land* (1979), which was illustrated by Djok Yumpungu. Berndt's work is meticulous, in contrast to some of the other collections that relied heavily on childhood memory.

Realising...that the Aborigines are so quickly disappearing—my old storytellers and their tribes, are, I believe, almost extinct—probably the only proofs that they ever existed will be their weapons and legends, which are both increasingly difficult to collect.

People, now fast expiring, but who were once lords of this glorious land? Kate Langloh Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales: Folklore of the Noogahburrrah, as told to the Piccaninnies* (1896, 1978) was introduced by Andrew Lang, who was at that time busily collecting traditional European tales for his famous Fairy Books. Langloh Parker (Catherine Stow) wrote in 1930:



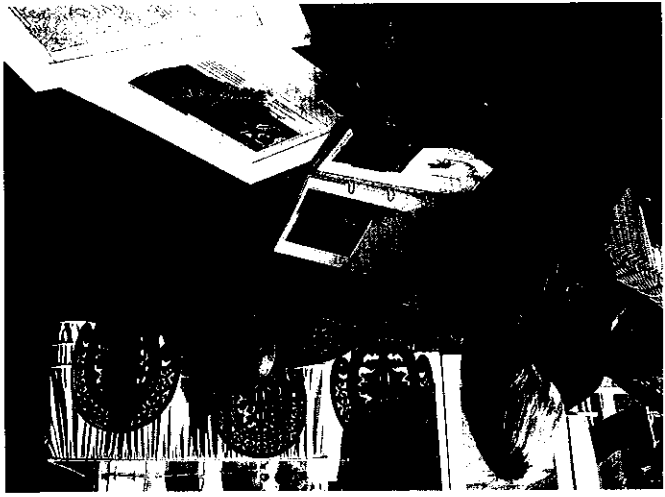
and *My Grandma Lived in Goolgoolich* (1983) were part of a surge of Australian children's books that not only affirmed Australian place but was to achieve international acclaim. *My Place* by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlings (1988) tells a history of Australia 1788–98, unravelling decade by decade, doing so in different registers (like the words and pictures of Anthony Browne's *Zoo* (1992) or *Voices in the Park* (1998)). The twenty voices of the children and the accents of the illustrations 'speak' out different conceptions of place, braiding ideas of past and present and future into a triad of narrative significance. The vibrant illustrations of *V for Vanishing: An Alphabet of Endangered Animals* (Mullins 1993) give meaning and advocacy to the bland scientific labels that make up the verbal text.

#### AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S BOOK COUNCIL AND DROMKEEN NATIONAL CENTRE FOR PICTURE BOOK ART

The Australian Children's Book Council was established in 1959 as an offspring of the Children's Book Council of New South Wales, which began in 1945 and which had set up the Children's Book Awards in 1946.

Basic bibliographies of Australian books have been compiled by Muir (1970, 1976). Comprehensive historical surveys have also been compiled (Bayfield 1994; Lees & MacIntyre 1993; Niall 1984; Saxby 1969, 1971, 1993, 2002). Agnes Nieuwenhuizen continues to stimulate interest in young adult literature in particular, with annotated lists of adolescent fiction (1992a, b) and as the leader of a number of activities bringing books, children, and authors together (see her interviews with writers for youth, 1991).

Meanwhile, a wonderful collection of children's literature original artwork and illustrations continues to grow at Dromkeen, the National Centre for Picture Book Art, originally established in a rural homestead in Victoria in 1973 by Courtney and Joyce Oldmeadow, and now a focus of



Professor Perry Nodelman, of Canada, examines original artworks at Dromkeen, the National Centre for Picture Book Art, in Victoria.

Other collections include the Lu Rees Archives at the University of Canberra and the State Libraries in Western Australia, South Australia, and Victoria.

*Fox*, by Wild and Brooks (2000), is an Australian fable set in a 'charred forest' after a bush-fire, in which Dog, Magpie and Fox play out a story of love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, with illustrations that at once personalise and amplify, and subtly hint at different heritages.

*Hello Baby* by Jenny Overend and Julie Vivas (1999) tells the story of a home birth. Increasingly, picturebooks overtly deal with social issues. Whereas Young Adult texts are often mostly concerned with their young heroes and adolescent cultures, picturebooks

constitute strong political stances on issues such as the environment, gender roles, the changing shapes of families, postcolonial guilt, and pressures of modern life. *The Rabbits* (John Marsden and Shaun Tan 1998) and *The Story of Rosy Dock* (Jeannie Baker 1995) are books that register strong resistance to the taking over of an ancient and grand landscape

by imported species (and colonisers). *How to Heal*

*a Broken Wing* (Bob Graham 2008) is a gentle story

about caring for wildlife (in this case birds), the

power of hope and the beauty of setting free. *The*

*Red Tree* (Shaun Tan 2001) registers the everyday

tumult of modern urban life by presenting an

inner world—a cyclorama of the mind—potentially

exploded into turmoil by the pressures of outer

worlds. *My Dog* by John Hefferman and Andrew

McLean (2001) registers the dislocation of war

in our time. *Where's Mum*, by Libby Gleeson and

Craig Smith (1992), registers the different ways

families operate; *Way Home*, by Libby Hathorn

and Greg Rogers (which won the Kate Greenaway

Medal for Illustration in 1994), is a social critique/

indictment registering the plight of a homeless

child. *Luke's Way of Looking* (Nadia Wheatley and

Mat Otley 1999) is one of many books that explore

and reveal tangles of inner worlds.

The collage artist Jeannie Baker made her concern for the future overt in books such

as *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (1987), *Window* (1992), and *The Hidden Forest* (2000). *The Story of Rosy Dock* (1995) questions ideas of beauty and describes a European 'flower' taking over and radically changing the natural Australian landscape. Other illustrators, using a wide variety of media, have played a significant role in interiorising space into personal experience; there are too many to list but they include Robert Ingpen (who has developed a magical watercolour style, as in Mem Fox's *Possum Magic* 1983 and *Willyrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* 1984), Donna Rawlings, Pamela Allen, Mat Otley, Craig Smith, John Winch, Noela Young, Jeanie Adams, Graeme Base, Ron Brooks, Jane Disher, Elizabeth Durack, Margaret Barry, Wayne Harris, Armin Greder, Bob Graham, Roland Harvey, Dee Huxley, Ann James, Astra Laci, Pamela Lofis, Annette Macarthur-Onslow, Arone Raymond Meeks (whose *Enora and the Black Crane* won the 1992 UNICEF-Ezra Jack

#### THE RED TREE

shaun tan



Keats International Award for Excellence in Children's Book Illustration), Junko Morimoto, Patricia Mullins, Deborah and Kilmeny Niland, Tricia Oktober, Jan Ormrod, Louise Pfanner, Robert Roemfeldt, Dick Roughsey, Jeanette Row, Pat Torres, and Percy Trezise. Aaron Blabey's *Pearl Barley and Charlie Parsley* (2009), *Woolus in the Sitee* by Wild and Spudvilas (2008), and Gleeson and Blackwood's *Amy and Louis* (2006) all continue a creative tradition that is continually evolving, as picturebooks expand to address wider audiences. Keen observers can also watch how artists develop and change: for example, Julie Vivas's illustrative style adopts a palette in *Puffing* (with Wild 2008) that is rather different from that of some of her other books.

One of the most successful and innovative authors and artists of recent times is Shaun Tan, and books such as his graphic novels *The Arrival* (winner of numerous prizes across the continuum) and *Tales of Suburbia* continue to challenge generic expectations in creative ways. *The Red Tree* is a modern classic, while *The Arrival* (2006) tells a complex story of deracination and of the struggle to make home in a new country. The illustrations may reference the USA more than Australia, but the book translates to any migrant experience. In widely different ways, they and others have created a plethora of images of Australia, in a range of styles: some dynamic, some painterly, some humorous, some witty, some mythic, some classical, some nostalgic, some firmly realistic.

### INDIGENOUS WRITING OF INDIGENOUS STORIES

There is an ever-increasing number of texts that not only tell stories of indigenous cultures but that also emerge authentically from them. The artistic development of Indigenous publishing houses in Australia, such as Magabala Books and Working Title Press, has helped to encourage this.

Aboriginal culture is full of stories that were told in pictures, on rock and cave walls, in body art. The stories about the Dreaming are stories about the beginnings of things (called 'aetiological' stories)—how the birds got their colours, how the moon got in the sky, and so on. *The Magic Fire at Warlukurlangu*, 'belonging to' Dolly Daniels Granites Nampijinpa (2003), explains how part of the country came to look as it does:

Today the flames from this big Fire Dreaming can still be seen in that country, Warlukurlangu, in the shape of large anthills. They are there to remind the Warlpiri people of what happened in the Dreaming.

The whole concept of the Dreaming is that it is continuous, not finished; it is still going on. This is part of a different perspective of time: cyclical, rather than linear, as in Western culture. Beginnings and endings aren't so fixed. Unity happens by repetition rather than by a close relationship between what happens at the opening and closing of a story.

*Ready to Dream* (2008), *An Australian 1, 2, 3 of Animals* (2009), and *W is for Wombat: My First Australian Word Book* (a board book, 2009), all by writer and illustrator Bronwyn Bancroft, depict unique images of landscape and animals that help to enrich Australian heritage. Bancroft's *Possum and Wattle: My Big Book of Australian Words* (2008) is an absolutely beautiful book that every Australian child should have the opportunity to read and

contemplate. Bancroft mixes Indigenous visuality with a mix of perspectives and a distinctively bright and varied palette.

*Yura and her Deadly Dog, Demon* (2007) written by Anita Heiss, a member of the Wiradjuri nation, with the students of La Perouse Public School, is a book for older readers that tells the story of contemporary urban life in a fun way.

*The Papunya School Book of Country and History* (2001), produced by the children and staff of Papunya School, near Alice Springs in Central Australia, is arguably more of an illustrated text than a picturebook. It was shortlisted in two categories in the 2002 CBC awards. It is a unique two-way telling of story, through reading words and reading country. Although so very different, it is not unlike *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* in pedagogical intent: the aim is to teach, and landscape is being used as a way of teaching. Each page has a subtitle, a type of chapter heading; the first one is 'Learning Country':

At Papunyah School, *ngurra*—country—is at the centre of our learning. It is part of everything we need to know....

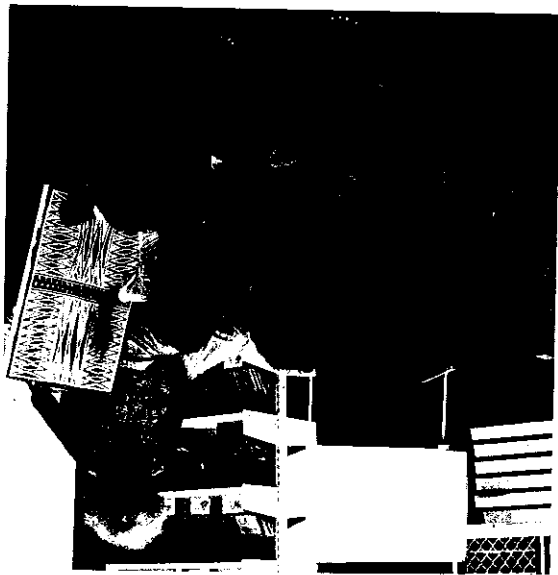
*Ngurra* is our word for home. It is also our word for homeland or traditional country.

Country—land—home—*ngurra*—is close-focused as history in songs and paintings and Dreaming stories. But the Papunya school curriculum is also about 'two-way learning': But as well as learning in this traditional way, we can also find out about our country and our history by putting some of the pieces of the story into a book. That's two way learning: Anangu way, and Western way. (p. 2)

In this collocation of visual history the 'new vision' for Papunya school is a visual one, with the Honey Ant Dreaming at its heart and point of connection, and with *Tjulkura* and *Anangu* teachers working together on curricula and teaching. Western-style maps cohabit with Indigenous aerial views; traditional borders tell stories of animal presence; here is a sense of history that predates, outlasts and transcends individual moment. Personalities are photographed on the inside dust cover; the endpapers are traditional, while the totemic honey ant metaphor and imagery brings together the two knowledge systems:

Increasingly, books are being produced in the language of particular regions, and the publication of bilingual books for Indigenous children, particularly those in remote areas, is to be much encouraged. One of many examples is the work on remote Elcho Island (Gawin'ku, in the Arafura Sea) of Kathy Guthadjaka, currently published through Shepherdson College.

Kathy Guthadjaka, of Elcho Island, working with children in the classroom at Gawa.



Kathy Guthadjaka of Elcho Island with friends including Rosemary Johnston in centre, February 2010.



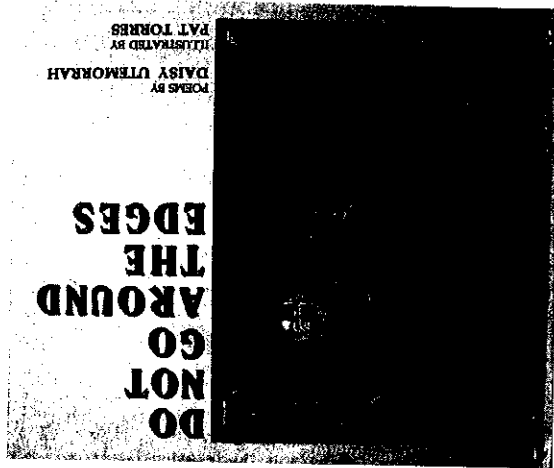
## INDIGENOUS LIFE WRITING AND PICTUREBOOKS

Picturebooks are increasingly being used by Indigenous writers in what may well develop into a new genre of life writing and autobiography. Note that the first activity in Chapter 23 related to two memoirs by Ian Abdullah, *As I Grew Older* and *Tucker*.

Indigenous writers and illustrators are using verbal and visual texts in exciting ways, juggling time and place and illustrations to tell complex stories of past, present, and future. As such they are also contributing to the telling of Australian national story.

One of the earlier examples is *Do Not Go Around the Edges*, by Daisy Utemorrah and Pat Torres (1990). This trifurcated (triple) text consists of a simple line of autobiographical recount of the past, a poetic response to it of the present, and an artistic image that relates to heritage and culture. Put together, the book interrogates ideas of home, place and belonging:

I am thinking of the mountains  
Memories tumbling out of my head  
Now all is gone.  
What must I do?  
Good times and bad I spend in civilisation.  
Will I go back to my hills and mountains  
and hear the whistle of the curlews all night long,  
echoes of the rushing stream,  
the wind rustling  
The frog croaks and sleeps,  
I long to see the stars smile down  
at me!



## INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

*A Is for Auntie*, by Elaine Russell (2000), a Children's Book Council of Australia Honour Book 2001, uses the traditional form of the alphabet book genre to reconstruct personal history into autobiography and thus give it narrative shape. Her later book, *The Shack that Dad Built* (2005), tells the story of her childhood at La Perouse. A minimal perspective and illustrations in bold primary colours with simple two-dimensional shapes outlined in black give this book a childlike charm.

Traditional Western perspectives work towards a vanishing point. Traditional Indigenous perspectives challenge this Western notion of perspective. In Aboriginal art, the perspective is aerial—looking down on the picture from above. This assists understandings of some of the circular patterns and animal tracks that seem to go off the top of a page, for example. Western notions of perspective change the size of what is being painted in relation to the position of the viewer. This could be seen as a very individual-centred idea of the universe—big trees become small because of where I happen to be standing (after all, they are not really small). Mountains are reduced in size not because they are, but because they look small from the distance of the viewing 'I' (or eye). On the other hand, Indigenous art offers an overhead perspective that conceives of land as unchangeable and of the individual as part of it.

## BOOKS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Maria Nikolajeva writes of young adult literature as 'a dear child', quoting a Swedish saying that 'A dear child has many names' (2002, p. 3), and situating her argument in a comprehensive discussion of the genre and its problems of definition. Roberta S. Triles notes the significance in the genre of parental presence/absence and of adolescent—parental relationship, demonstrating that conventional understandings of an issue-based, conflictual literature need revisiting (2000, 2002, pp. 9–21).

'Young adult' in Australia embraces a wide range of literature and a wide range of age groups (anything from 12 to 20, even younger, even older), but in general its modern version seeks to allow the protagonist to describe events and convey perceptions, feelings, and emotions from a highly subjective point of view that is constructed by the author (and accepted by the author's culture) as an ideology of adolescence. In its older versions, it is even more complex, and the boundaries less easily defined. *My Brilliant Career*, by Miles Franklin (1901), written in the first person when its author was 16 years old about the inner rebellions of a 16-year-old heroine, Sybylla, was greeted by A.G. Stephens (editor of the influential *Bulletin* literary magazine) as 'the very first Australian novel to be published'. Henry Lawson wrote in its Preface: 'The book is true to Australia—the truest I ever read.' Franklin's story caused uproar in her family, so much so that its author withdrew it from sale and left home. Indeed, Miles Franklin departed the country in 1905, not returning for thirty years. Nonetheless, *My Brilliant Career* ends with a lengthy song of praise about Australia: 'I am proud that I am Australian, a daughter of the Southern Cross, a child of the mighty bush.'



A distinctive feature of some Australian books for and about young adults

mythic surrealism, as in Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy* (1963), Joan Lindsay's *Picnic*

Wrightson, such as *The Nargun and the Stars* (1973). Wrightson creates stories

modern life side by side with a strong sense of an ancient and myth-laden land

sense of a surreal symbolism continues with writers such as Sonya Hartnett (1994, *Sleeping Dogs* 1995), Allan Baillie (*Secrets of Walden Rising* 1997), Gillian

(*Space Demons* 1986 won the Children's Literature Peace Prize in 1987, *Sky*

*The Whale's Child* 2002), Lilith Norman (*A Dream of Seas* 1978), and Gary Crew

the work of writers from the larger continuum, most notably Elizabeth Jolly, Tim

David Malouf, and Christopher Koch.

Indeed, there appear to be two main streams of writing for older readers, the

as noted above, and the firmly realistic. This latter stream is represented by writers

as James Maloney (*Doug* 1993), Phillip Gwynne (*Deadly Umma* 1999), and Gary

(*The Bamboo Flute* 1991, although this is also a poetic text). John Marsden

be somewhere between the two, action- and adventure-laced with a touch of

real, sometimes in unexpected places (such as the *Tomorrow When the War Began*

1994–99). Nadia Wheatley (*The House that was Eureka* 1984, *Vigil* 2000) is a

writer of past and present and their interrelationships; Victor Kelleher (*Master of*

1982, *Taronga* 1986) is a writer of present and future. *Only the Heart* (Brianna

and David Phu an Chiem 1997) is a powerful story telling of late-20th-century

but reflecting Caswell's interest in myth and fantasy. Angela Martin's *Beyond*

(2001) is a similarly strong story with a surreal undertone. On the other hand

Hartnett's *Butterfly* (2009) is, unlike most of her other books, more firmly realistic

ethical issues and/or growing up in difficult circumstances (Klein's *Came Back*

(*Teacher's Pet* 2003); all these, however, have also written sensitive stories per

Ashey 1984), Paul Jennings (*Unreal Eight Surprising Stories* 1985), and Morris

Another group, loosely labelled as humorous writers, include Robin Klein (*He*

Hartnett's *Butterfly* 1989, Jennings' wonderful picturebook *The Fisherman and the*

(1994), and Gleitzman's *Two Weeks with the Queen* (1989) and *Boy Overboard*

## AUSTRALIAN POETRY FOR CHILDREN

One of the most exciting current trends is the growing interest in poetry. It

and mixed start—which included W.A. Cawthorne's *Who Killed Cockatoo?* (1991)

Dennis's *A Book for Kids* (1921) and 'Banjo' Paterson's *The Animals Noah For*

the genre has been enriched by poets and artists such as Mary and Elizabeth

*Magic Trumpet* 1946), Lydia Pender (*Marbles in my Pocket* 1958), Max Fatch

*my Dog and Other People* 1980, *The Very Long Nose of Jonathan Jones* 2001)

(*Poems in my Luggage* 1989) and Anne Bell (*Wind on your Face* 1983).

The work of Stephen Merrick and the development of the verse form

introducing children and young people to poetry in a new way; his public

## OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC

of the literature of the islands of the Pacific had its beginnings in inscriptional and

traditions. New Zealand has a vibrant literature for children and has produced many

useful authors, including Margaret Mahy and Patricia Grace. The Maori tradition

from books on myths and legends in the Maori language, such as *Whakaekei nga*

(*Riding the Waves*) (Bishop 2006) to books about the cycles of family life, such as

Samoa books are often bilingual (Samoa and English) and are represented here by

work of the Western Samoan artist Momoe von Reiche. Stories such as *O le Afi* (The

and *Lama le Po* tell stories of village life and night fishing. To gain an enriched

understanding of Samoan culture, teachers should read the short stories of Alfred Wendt.

Asian literature contains many retellings of legends and also an interesting number

books on social issues. *Ana Goes to School* (Roberts & Robinson 1995) is a lovely book

including going to school for the first time, and could well be read alongside other books

on other cultures on the same subject.

Japan has a rich and interesting children's literature, which is increasingly well

researched by scholars, and with a strong *manga* tradition; it is best to refer to a reputable

critical study. China has a growing children's literature. *Tuan Yuan*, by Yu Li Qiong and

translated by Zhu Cheng Liang, is one to look out for; this won the famous Feng Zikai

Chinese Children's Picture Book Award and tells the story of a father coming home to his

for Chinese New Year. This book could be read alongside Rachel Isadora's *South*

and text, *At the Crossroads*, and any other book about fathers returning home.

An Australian book describing a Chinese heritage and beautifully illustrated by Anne

There is also a YA version, and a film version produced by Bruce Beresford (2009).

check out books from other neighbouring cultures; many of their literatures for children

and developing but their stories are rich and diverse, and reflect deep strains of

all traditions.

## Summary

1 Children's books become part of a national imagination—think of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Wind in the Willows* in the United Kingdom, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Little Women* in the USA, *Anne of Green Gables* in Canada, *Pippi Longstocking* in Sweden, *The Finn Family Moomintroll* in Finland.

2 Australia is a very young modern nation and has struggled to define itself (as part of the West, as part of Asia, as Pacific Rim, as Oceania).  
3 Australia also has a history of perhaps 50,000 years of indigenous storytelling and Dreamings passed on generation to generation orally and visually.  
4 The literatures of other countries portrayed early Australia as a place of both exile and punishment, and a paradise place for making good.  
5 Australian colonial literature began a tradition of fascination with and respect for landscape that endures today as environmentalism.

6 The first Indigenous stories to be printed were written by white authors.

7 Today Indigenous writers are writing Indigenous stories and some are using the picturebook (which gives the flexibility of both visual and verbal images) as an autobiographical medium.

8 Indigenous visual images express ideas of perspective that are less centred around the individual, and that are aerial rather than related to the Western notion of the vanishing point.

9 Australia has a rich and thriving children's literature, from picturebooks to books for young adults.

10 It enlarges understanding of our own literature to seek out books emerging from other countries in the Australasian region, and to explore themes and ideas.

## Activity 9

TEXT: *Do Not Go Around the Edges* by Daisy Utemorrah and Pat Torres (1990)

*Do Not Go Around the Edges* presents a life story through the media of history and art. It builds story in three ways:

- 1 As an autobiographical narrative
- 2 As a poetic response
- 3 As illustration or visual text.

It tells of the importance of place, and describes a sense of dislocation and yearning and the quest for ideas of 'home' and identity.

Far far away far far away  
Is my island home  
Called Galani!  
Far far away!  
Far far away  
Is my island home!  
Aw-aw-aw.

This text provides a wonderful beginning for talking about Aboriginal literature.

Discuss the difficult issue of appropriation—taking over stories, without acknowledging ownership. (Compare it to Western concepts of breaking copyright.) Introduce the children to Magabala Books and Working Title Press, and encourage them to check inside for the acknowledgment of ownership of the story by tribal elders.

Read some Dreaming legends, and remind the children that there are different ways of looking at the world, different ways of representing worlds, and different ways of telling stories.

Also discuss different ideas of *perspectives* (see also previous chapter). This opens wonderful areas of discussion and 'telling me' times.  
Discuss the idea of nation. Read with the class some of Daisy Utemorrah's poetry and discuss it in relation to issues of reconciliation. Discuss meanings of the word 'reconcile'. Dictionary definitions include:

- to re-establish friendship between
- to settle or resolve a dispute
- to bring to acceptance or acquiescence
- to make compatible or consistent
- to purify a consecrated place in a special ceremony after an act of desecration

(*Readers' Digest Universal Dictionary* 1988).

What does 'reconciliation' mean in Australia today? How do books such as these help build up understanding? (Also introduce children to the *Papunya School Book of Country and History* as a way of developing this discussion.) What sort of yearnings does Daisy express? How do the pictures emphasise these yearnings?

Our dream and our past is buried under the ground.  
When the sun rises and begins another day  
all is empty, ground and hill shake on us,  
overwhelmed with people everywhere.

The dream the past—where does it stand now?  
The burun burun whirs in the night time  
And the owl calling!

And the dingo howling!  
The moon shines on the water, all is ended—  
and the dreamtime gone.

This book can inspire children to write their own story and create both a poetic and an artistic response relating to different times. Because the line of autobiographical narrative is so simple (sometimes only one sentence) it is a particularly encouraging creative writing model for ESL children (see Chapter 32). Remind children that they are the experts in their own story.

Note that writing a poetic response frees children from the restraints of normal sentence construction and the conventions of grammatical structure (see Chapter 30).

Give some examples of writing poetry, being creative in your setting out. Encourage children into writing fragments of lines, glimpses of ideas: